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ABSTRACT

Dramatic texts are an ideal pedagogical tool for clarifying certain aspects of communication such as authorial stance, point of view, role, persona, impersonation, ethos, shared communal values, cultural assumptions, genre expectations, audience, performance, dialogue, and enactment. Using dramatic texts in a composition class can broaden student exposure to language contexts and rhetorical situations in a way that benefits their writing and thinking generally. Students can learn to focus their writing perspective and construct a rhetorical "voice" by assuming a role from a play and arguing from a specific character's point of view. To develop an understanding of ethos, and shared cultural assumptions, students "translate" a play such as Sheridan's "The Rivals" into modern terms, with roughly equivalent contemporary characters and settings based on the local area. Students learn to understand genre expectations by asking whether "Oedipus Rex" is a murder mystery or a detective story, or whether Peter Shaffer's "Equus" is a problem-solving or therapy/ catharsis play. All discourse is in some sense dramatic and all writing and speaking are dialogue; therefore, drama can expand student writing skills. (SRT)

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CS 209 920

Using Drama in the Composition Class

The controversy in recent years about the advisability and efficacy of using literary texts in the composition class has raised important issues and forced those of us who advocate using these texts to defend ourselves and rethink our assumptions. In one of the more persuasive articles opposing the use of literature in the composition class, Barbara and Francis Lide argue that composition classes should contribute to future academic and occupational writing with "a high degree of efficiency" (Lides, p. 110). To accomplish this, they suggest, quoting Julia S. Falk, that students should "do extensive reading in the particular form of writing that they will be later expected to produce themselves" (Lides, p. 112). This of course presumes that we know what kinds of writing, if any, our students will be doing in later life, and that we have the foresight to present only that sort of writing to them as models. Yet it is not my purpose today to take up the gauntlet against this challenge or to attack its assumptions; instead, I would like to clarify several of my own assumptions before launching into my subject proper - the use of dramatic texts in the writing class.

The legitimacy of arguments like those presented by the Lides and by Falk rests on the assumption that students learn primarily through imitation and that this is how they should learn. However, if one's goal in the composition class is not only to teach particular writing models, but also to teach reading analysis, critical thinking, language acquisition, and even such less directly relevant skills like perceiving, listening, or imagining,

then many kinds of texts, literary or not, may provide very fruitful material for increasing students' understanding of language and communication. My position today is that using dramatic texts in the classroom can broaden student exposure to language contexts and rhetorical situations in a way that benefits their writing and thinking generally.

Most students will not be called upon to write drama at any time during their lives. Nevertheless, the importance of dialogue in the study of effective communication goes back at least as far as Aristotle, a fact ably pointed out in the most recent issue of College English in an article entitled "Tropes of the Composing Process." Phillip K. Arrington devotes a section of his essay to the trope of "composing as dramatic speech," quoting Ann E. Berthoff's argument that dialogue plays a crucial role in helping students develop "the discursive power of language" (p. 326). Recent composition texts have made reference to this aspect of writing, and at least one new book devotes itself exclusively to helping students learn to write through mastering elements of dialogue (Ruggiero). Thus it is altogether fitting that dramatic texts be used in the writing class to develop students' awareness of the basic dialogue underlying all communication.

Drama shares with poetry and fiction some of the same linguistic features and perceptual formulations that can be useful for student analysis and discussion: among these are not only readily identifiable language elements such as image, metaphor, or parallelism, but also larger structural elements such as motif, chronology, and perspective. But to focus today's discussion even further, I want to suggest that, in the composition class, drama can be particularly helpful in three broadly grouped areas: 1) authorial stance,

point of view, role, persona, impersonation; 2) ethos, shared communal values, cultural assumptions, genre expectations; and 3) audience, performance, dialogue, enactment. These three areas necessarily overlap, and they are present as well in poetry and fiction, not to mention expository writing; but their presence in drama is so marked and accessible that students have little difficulty identifying them, and dramatic texts thus become an ideal pedagogical tool for clarifying these aspects of communication.

For ease and simplicity of illustration during today's presentation, I will focus on two important plays, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's The Rivals, to suggest some of the many benefits of using drama in writing classes. Turning to the first of the three major groupings: it will come as no surprise to any composition teacher to suggest that students frequently have difficulty assuming a clear stance in their writing, with a consistency of tone or perspective. More often than not, inexperienced writers are unable to construct a role for themselves as writers - a role that seems as difficult as it is alien. Such writers may vacillate between the comic and the serious or between the stiffly formal and the embarrassingly casual without sensing any discrepancy. But, faced with the task of temporarily assuming a role from a play and arguing from the point of view of a specific character, students can often focus their perspectives in a way that gives them good experience in constructing a rhetorical "voice."

Students are frequently surprised to learn that they can take on a variety of personae and write effective papers. If I ask them to pretend they are Oedipus, Creon, or Iocaste, for example, and to explain or argue their point of view of the dramatic action, many students delight in imagining a specifically personal, tragic view of the circumstances. And the result-

ing struggle with language which they hope will be appropriate often gives them good instruction in diction and clarity of tone. The following opening paragraph, taken from an "autobiographical" paper written by a student pretending to be the outcast Oedipus, attempts to account for a troubled life:

> I, Oedipus Rex, the exiled King of Thebes and now wanderer of strange lands, am resolved to write an account of my life, not to promote praise, but to proclaim a warning to whatever hands this letter may fall into. I warn him not to take those possessions he has for granted nor to make any hasty decisions. For it is for such reasons that I am what I am today: a pilgrim sojourning in a strange land.

Student responses I have received, in addition to many types of Oedipus autobiographies, have also included a daily diary of Creon and a "suicide note" of Iocaste, which concludes with the following words:

> May the gods forgive my son and me. May our children not perish for the sins of their parents. I can not go on living in sin. It is now time for me to end my pain -

The same approach works equally well with comedy, as when students are asked to explain themselves as Lydia Languish or Faulkland; they frequently enjoy trying to be humorous only a week or two after feeling horrified in Thebes.

Another kind of approach to dealing with point of view or authorial stance has less to do with personal perspective than with an inductive consideration of issues or problem-solving through a counterpointing of positions. Oedipus Rex, for example, can serve as the launching point for a paper dealing with the problems of adopted children seeking the identity of their parents at all costs. I received one good paper in which the student compared Oedipus' experience to that of a friend who was driven to find out why he had been given up as a baby. The friend's story ended more happily than Oedipus', but the paper raised some provocative parallels and forced

the writer to make insightful connections. In a similar way, students reading a play like The Rivals can actively consider specific viewpoints toward courtship, marriage, parental authority, and violence, working toward concrete solutions that are in fact not that far removed from contemporary circumstance.

The second major grouping of elements which make drama especially useful in the composition class has to do with ethos, shared cultural assumptions, and genre expectations. In practice, I avoid the term "ethos" in class, as it intimidates and confuses beginning students; but few, if any, have difficulty considering the values and assumptions of a given play and contrasting them with our own. One of the most lively and productive assignments I have made of this type involves "translating" The Rivals into modern terms, with roughly equivalent contemporary characters and settings based on the local area. After a bit of initial prodding, students relish finding analogues for Lydia Languish, Captain and Sir Anthony Absolute, Bob Acres, and others. With the telling exception of Mrs. Malaprop (which we discuss), students have surprisingly little difficulty coming up with character, setting, costume, and language equivalents with which they are relatively familiar. In one version, Captain Absolute is a pre-med student posing as a motorcycle hood, Lydia a "dingy freshman in love," and Sir Anthony a well-heeled executive from Chicago. One black student set her version in the context of black fraternities and sororities near our campus. Other students have chosen to compare and contrast the assumptions of Sheridan's play with those our own time, finding not only the expected differences but also some rather striking similarities.

Although students enjoy these kinds of theatrical analyses and comparisons, the pedagogical purpose is not to provide classroom entertainment but to make students aware that a writer, at his or her best, creates a world based on shared assumptions: communicating effectively requires being aware of social assumptions. Freshmen are often surprised at their own values which become explicit when set against those of a play like The Rivals or Oedipus. One of my topics asks students to challenge the Greeks' implicit assumption that Oedipus' life was fated and that Oedipus had precious little choice in the matter—a world view which flies in the face of our contemporary American "be-all-you-can-be" attitude toward individual free will. One young woman took just such an approach, upbraiding Oedipus for his refusal to acknowledge his complicity in several key situations.

Another way of approaching these kinds of shared assumptions involves asking students to analyze the genre expectations of a given play. To what extent is Oedipus Rex a murder mystery or detective story? What elements does it share with contemporary examples of these subgenres? Many student writers are already avid readers of similar popular works of our day and can readily assess this 2500-year-old play in terms of their own genre assumptions:

> The plot of "Oedipus Rex" thickens as it goes on, intriguing the reader, as if it were the #1 best-selling murder mystery of 430 B.C. The audience is drawn into Oedipus' investigation mostly in the first scene by Teiresias' lengthy clues. In fact, a true detective could actually have this murder solved by the end of the first scene, but the audience is still in the dark, as is Oedipus.

A similar approach can be taken with Peter Shaffer's Equus, looking at it either as problem-solving or as therapy/catharsis, since many students are familiar with the conventional psychotherapy metaphor of contemporary TV and

film. More difficult is to ask students to identify the comic elements in The Importance of Being Earnest or The Rivals, considering the expectations of the audience and the ways these expectations are frequently dashed or inverted.

The importance of genre analysis in the composition class is not to teach students the theory of comedy or tragedy, but to suggest that one always writes within certain boundaries of what is expected and desired: the writer operates within a chosen context which makes possible what she or he wants to say. This becomes even more clear when looking specifically at the audience itself and the demands that performance make on both writers and their public. This third major grouping of audience, performance, dialogue, and enactment is a particularly large one, larger than I have time to deal with in any great detail here. In trying to increase student awareness of audience, which is difficult to do in the traditional classroom expository "laboratory," I ask beginning writers to consider how they would direct or perform key scenes and what they would attempt to elicit from their audience - either in the local area or somewhere else. This puts them in a dual role as readers of the text (and therefore audience) and as performers of the text for an audience of their choosing. Unlike with other, less public forms of discourse, they quickly perceive that audience awareness is crucial to drama and that a successful dramatic writer (in any genre) must know the audience and anticipate its needs.

Approaching the idea of performance in this way, composition students are asked to anticipate audience needs in contemporary productions of Oedipus Tyrannos and The Rivals. In more focused papers, individual writers

describe the action of a scene from the point of view of a single character, explaining how they purport to communicate their most important thoughts, feelings, deliberations, decisions, and actions to an audience:

> When the scene opens, Iocaste enters and begins praying to the gods. Her prayer needs to be emphasized slightly, putting the greatest amount of emphasis on the lines, "He will listen to any voice that speaks disaster, and my advice goes for nothing." This will give the effect of foreshadowing. When the messenger enters and shares his message with her, relief and happiness must be expressed through her actions. She must bring the emotional level of the play up by putting a great amount of energy into the lines that begin, "O riddlers of God's will . . ." . . . .

Another way of going about this is to invert the process and invite the student to become an audience member who interacts with one of the characters - either through imagined (written) conversation, by letter, or through audience response to the characters on stage. Yet another approach involves asking students to discuss the function of a particular character, for instance, the chorus in Oedipus, in terms of the audience. The possibilities for setting up these kinds of dramatic situations, in which writing students are required to anticipate audience needs and reactions or to respond, as audience, to the dramatic text, are endless, but the essential ingredient is that students be made aware of the audience-writer dialogue, with either performers or themselves as intermediaries.

If the presence of intermediaries seems likely to cloud the issue with beginning writers (it doesn't seem to in my courses), it does bring out another aspect of the rhetorical situation, and that is the necessity of enactment, of making language concrete and believable. Students frequently are haphazard or sketchy in their inclusion of details in expository writing, without having a sense of the reader's need to visualize, to believe, or to

feel moved. Once students, using dramatic texts as "raw material," see the emotive effects a text can have in performance, they gain a greater understanding of making a text "come alive," making it "real" for an audience. At least one of my composition colleagues regularly forces his students to read their expository writing aloud to the entire class, in order to develop their sense of audience - a practice that reportedly has salutary effects. So, rather than merely retelling or summarising, student writers are encouraged to verbally create a scene, to enact it in such a way that an audience will respond.

There are certainly other advantages to teaching drama in the composition class, not least of which is the enjoyment they derive from it and the interaction they witness between spoken and written language - an interaction they don't otherwise readily perceive, except perhaps with recited poetry. Yet the ultimate goal in the composition class is to incorporate these insights regarding authorial stance, ethos, and performance and to carry them over into all areas of the student's writing. All discourse is in some sense dramatic, involving conflicts of viewpoints and shared rhetorical context. Arrington rightly points out the long tradition of the "discourse-as-dialogue metaphor" from Aristotle to Kenneth Burke, which forms the backbone of communication and intellectual enquiry (p. 326). Ruggiero argues that

> the dialogue is uniquely suited to the needs of contemporary students, many of whom are less comfortable with the written word than students of previous generations. It is a form of discourse that is more familiar to them than the essay, reflecting as it does the casualness, the rapid exchanges, and the spontaneity of everyday conversation. Thus it offers the easiest and most natural way to learn effective thinking (p. xi).

We are gradually coming to acknowledge, both in our composition theory and

in our practice in the classroom, that all writing (and speaking) is dialogue - interaction of thought, belief, and emotion - between speaker and audience. Is it any surprise, then, that drama has much to teach the composition student, and that insightful use of plays in writing classes can expand student writing skills and broaden rhetorical horizons?

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The author would also like to express his appreciation to students in his composition classes whose papers are quoted in the text (listed alphabetically): Kathleen Bragg, Jewel Hanson, Tim Jones, Holly McHugh, and Cindy Smitley.

Appendix

Dramatic texts are particularly helpful in composition classes because they emphasize three key areas of rhetoric: 1) authorial stance, point of view, role, persona, impersonation; 2) ethos, shared communal values, cultural assumptions, genre expectations; and 3) audience, performance, enactment. These elements are present also in essays and other genres, but are generally more accessible to students in dramatic form.

1. AUTHORIAL STANCE / POINT OF VIEW / ROLE

Students have difficulty with stance and persona in their writing. Asking them to write from a mask can be very helpful in making them aware of presentation, point of view, and consistency of perspective.

Assignments: Persuasion or argument from point of view taken from a play

Inductive consideration of thematic issues; problem-solving

2. ETHOS / SHARED COMMUNAL VALUES / GENRE EXPECTATIONS

Historical contrasts make students aware of their own social assumptions.

Assignments: Analysis of communal values and assumptions through modernisation or comparison/contrast

Analysis of genre expectations

3. AUDIENCE / PERFORMANCE / ENACTMENT

Students need to increase their awareness of audience: writing as a special kind of performance; the necessity of generating, reaching,

and interesting an audience; the advantages of enacting or showing, dramatising rather than merely reporting.

Assignments: Consideration of performance and audience needs/expectations

Dialogue, direct interchange with a character

OTHER ADVANTAGES:

Multiple perspectives

Interaction of spoken and written discourse

Class involvement